

CHRISTIAN AID
GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE
PARTICIPATORY
VULNERABILITY
AND CAPACITY
ASSESSMENTS (PVCA)

POVERTY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Christian Aid aims to change the lives of some of the world's poorest people by helping them to challenge the big issues that keep them in poverty and to move them out of this situation by shifting the balance of power, an aim stated in our document *No Small Change*.¹

We want to see poor people using their capacities to tackle the main factors that keep them poor and marginalised.

To be able to support this process, we must first understand the change people want and how this change can happen.

A Participatory Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (PVCA) empowers poor people to analyse their problems and suggest their own solutions. PVCA is a valuable tool that can assist Christian Aid

and partners to be more transparent and to make a **measurable impact** in its corporate goals of securing livelihoods, accountable governance and strengthening the organisation.

An external evaluation of Christian Aid's disaster-risk-reduction work in Honduras, Bangladesh and Malawi, which piloted the PVCA approach, strongly recommended that we should apply PVCA to all livelihood, development and poverty reduction work to:

- complement baseline information for measuring impact
- strengthen participation of beneficiaries in decision-making
- optimise the relevance and appropriateness of action and protect investments.

INTRODUCTION

A PVCA is carried out in a community to collect, analyse and systematise information about its vulnerability in a structured way.

Its main purpose is to:

- identify the key vulnerabilities of a particular community
- understand how community members perceive risks and threats to their lives and livelihoods
- analyse the resources (capacities) and strategies available to them to address or reduce these risks
- help the community develop an action plan as an important output of the PVCA process.

If done well, it has an empowering effect by reinforcing people's capacity for collective action, enabling a community to understand the risks it faces and identifying opportunities available to it in order to make informed decisions about its future.

Background

PVCA is an essential disaster-risk-reduction tool to be used for designing livelihoods or poverty-reduction projects. As understanding of the short-, medium- and long-term impacts of climate change increases, the importance of applying PVCA to a wider set of livelihood risks grows.² The assessment also helps reveal the links between the different kinds of risk a community faces and the way in which the members of that community interact.

PVCA exercises require time and preparation and should be tailored to local conditions and resources available – especially relating to time and staff.

Christian Aid has used PVCA during the implementation of the Building Disaster-Resilient Communities (BDRC) project in Central America, Bangladesh, the Philippines,

the Sahel and Malawi. BDRC is a five-year, UK Department for International Development-funded project that aims to reduce community vulnerability to future shocks and crises across Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean and Africa.

This paper aims to collate this experience and provides examples of good practice to assist development and emergency field staff, partners and communities to analyse a community's vulnerability, define action plans with them and support an enabling environment that reduces vulnerability.

The BDRC project's mid-term review, which was based on the Honduras, Bangladesh and Malawi experiences, strongly recommended that all Christian Aid's livelihood projects should apply PVCA to the early planning stages of a project to:

- complement baseline information for measuring impact
- strengthen participatory approaches
- optimise relevance and appropriateness through ensuring a focus on risk and capacities, that in turn will mainstream disaster risk reduction (DRR) into livelihood activities.

We recommend that PVCA should be integrated into livelihood, development and poverty eradication work.

In this paper, we want to answer the questions why, how and with what purpose we should carry out a PVCA. We will also outline the main challenges that Christian Aid staff and partners have faced while carrying out the exercise and offer recommendations on how to overcome them.

Part one of these guidelines explains what PVCA is, what the benefits of this approach are and when it can be applied. Part two describes a step-by-step approach to conducting the assessment and the main challenges that are likely to occur at each step.

PART ONE

WHAT IS A PVCA?

THE BENEFITS OF PVCAs

PVCAs can:

1. Complement baseline information for measuring impact
2. Empower communities
3. Bring partners and volunteers into closer contact with communities
4. Make us more accountable to beneficiaries
5. Facilitate integration of activities toward change by:
 - i. integrating development work
 - ii. helping to identify gaps in partners' capacity and strengthening networking
 - iii. identifying advocacy actions.

1. Complementing baseline information for measuring impact

Donors want to see that the funding they have given has had a positive impact on poor communities. To show this, we need to demonstrate progress made from the start of the project to the end. This requires sufficient baseline information at the beginning of a project and a final evaluation. PVCA can provide accurate baseline information to identify where communities are and where they want to be. It provides a documented process by which communities can develop and own action plans that they can then implement with assistance. It also supports our corporate commitment to accountability and encourages communities to be more involved in project monitoring.

2. PVCA as community empowerment

PVCA is more than just an exercise to collect background information or make a project known among beneficiaries: it is an empowering tool that gives vulnerable communities a chance to organise themselves and take the future into their own hands. It signals the moment when Christian Aid, national partners and affected communities start working together towards a common goal.

Goal 1.2 of Christian Aid's report *Turning Hope into Action* is to enable poor and marginalised communities to work together to manage livelihoods, risks and resources, while goal 1.3 highlights the need to ensure that development is inclusive and resilient to climate change and that poor men and women can adapt to climate change.³

PVCA is a way to mobilise communities to commit to work towards common goals that they have identified and want to achieve. It provides space for all community members to voice their opinions, including marginal groups that can often be excluded from community planning.

The findings of the PVCA are used to develop a community action plan, where local authorities, community members and organisations – such as Christian Aid partners – work together towards common goals. The information obtained during a PVCA exercise can be invaluable for increasing local involvement, building commitment and generally increasing the impact and reducing the risk of misunderstandings and pitfalls further down the lifecycle of the project.

Salome Ntububa, a regional emergency officer for Christian Aid in West Africa, said that while communities were used to rapid participatory exercises, PVCA was more like a workshop in which facilitators and members of a community learn from each other.

3. Bringing partner staff and volunteers into close contact with communities

PVCA brings partner staff in contact not only with representatives of a community but also with its members. Working with people rather than working for them creates community trust and increases staff and volunteers' commitment and enthusiasm. If done properly, the process can help partner staff to become facilitators of community action rather than service deliverers.

PVCA has the potential to bring communities and their legal representatives – that is, local authorities – together.

The close cooperation involved in conducting a PVCA together can help both sides to understand better the existing opportunities and limitations, and can also help poor and marginalised women and men to hold decision-makers to account for the delivery of services and benefits. (This is goal 3.1 in *Accountable Governance*, Christian Aid's corporate strategy.⁴)

Participants in the PVCA exercise in Bangladesh included representatives of Christian Aid partner Union Parishad, members from the village disaster-mitigation committee, teachers, religious leaders, members of the village elite and non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists.

4. Making us more accountable to beneficiaries

Christian Aid is in the process of being certified by HAP (the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership) as an organisation committed to improving beneficiary accountability.⁵ The HAP requirements under Benchmark 3 are that 'the agency shall enable beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in programme decisions and seek their informed consent:

'3.1 The agency shall specify the processes it uses to identify intended beneficiaries and their representatives

with specific reference to gender, age, disability and other identifiable vulnerabilities.

'3.2 The agency shall enable intended beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.'

Both HAP Benchmark 2 (Transparency and information sharing) and 5 (Feedback/complaint handling systems) are relevant to the PVCA exercise.

After introducing the benchmarks of the HAP standard to Christian Aid partners in Zimbabwe, Gift Dube from the Zimbabwe Project Trust said that 'the element of transparency builds confidence in the community and a confident community owns the project'.

In the Sahel area of Africa, we are reinforcing the quality of BDRC pilot projects implemented by Christian Aid partners by building discussions of information-sharing, participation and complaints into BDRC programmes at community level with the objective of ensuring the integration of HAP principles. The activity has been facilitated by an external consultant working in close collaboration with Christian Aid staff and partners.

5. Integrating actions for positive change

The PVCA process gives some idea of how disaster management can be better integrated with other development projects so that they support each other. Applying this would allow us to make durable changes to people's lives while pursuing disaster-preparedness activities with the community.

A PVCA takes a more integrated approach to the idea of vulnerability, tapping into community knowledge of local needs and risk in order to build resilience into any project design. For example, when a community identifies shelter as a local need, the potential risks, such as flooding, are taken into account so that buildings are not damaged every year.

When we conducted a PVCA in Mchinji, Malawi, in 2005 with Christian Aid partner CARD, one of the main threats identified by the community members was HIV/AIDS (which came second only to drought). The exercise was part of a disaster-mitigation project and as such did not contemplate HIV work directly. However, we could not ignore the community's perception of its vulnerability to HIV and its impact when planning the project, and were able to link with Christian Aid HIV projects in Malawi.

This integrated approach to assessing a community's vulnerability can also help to identify gaps in a partner's capacity and in Christian Aid programmes, and can prompt

us to link with others who can complement our activities.

It can also highlight areas for action by advocacy groups, as the need to build community resilience often cannot be met without addressing wider social and political issues and involving the government. This can result in specific lobbying of local government departments to provide support to community-based risk reduction, or in longer-term advocacy for policy change.

In February 2006, we conducted PVCA training with Christian Aid partners in Sierra Leone, including a field-testing exercise. One of the activities initiated by a community in the diamond-mining area was to appoint a group who will meet the municipal authority to push for the fulfilment of a long-promised access road to the mining village on behalf of the community.

WHEN AND WHEN NOT TO DO A PVCA

As part of the PVCA, community members develop action plans with project staff by analysing together what resources and strategies are available in order to address the risks and vulnerabilities identified.⁶

When a PVCA can be used

A PVCA can be used for:

- project design
- community mobilisation and commitment building
- documenting capacities, vulnerability and the vision of a community.

Thus PVCA can be part of the identification phase of a project during needs assessment and the findings can then be used to design, write and justify a project proposal.

PVCA can also be used to mobilise communities to work towards common goals. The findings of the PVCA are used to develop a community action plan, where local authorities, community members and local organisations – such as Christian Aid partners, for example – come together to work towards the common goals.

The information obtained during a PVCA exercise can be invaluable for increasing local involvement and building commitment, while increasing the impact and reducing the risk of misunderstandings and pitfalls further on in the lifecycle of a project.

When PVCA is used to build commitment to common goals, it is carried out at the start of community-based actions,

sometimes as the very first activity. In this case, although its use in assessing vulnerabilities and needs remains, the main purpose here is not a needs-assessment report or a set of baseline data, but a joint community action plan, developed by the relevant local stakeholders with the support and facilitation of Christian Aid partners and owned and supported by community members.

Luis Mcheka Chilenje of Nalingula 2 Village in Malawi, said: 'As a community, each household takes its own responsibility to protect itself against the impact of various hazards such as drought, flood and livestock diseases. This assessment has helped us to understand different hazards and how we can prepare or protect our livelihoods against the hazards as a community.'

A PVCA allows communities themselves to explore and document in a structured but appropriate way their vulnerabilities, capacities and processes, as well as their shared vision.

The information gathered during the process can be shared and disseminated across the community and with local representatives and other stakeholders.

When a PVCA should not be used

A PVCA should not be used:

- as a large-scale investigation (although it can inform one)
- for reinforcing preconceived assumptions
- as an extractive research method
- during and after conflict, such as civil war.

Large-scale investigations: a question of scale

The PVCA is a methodology conceived for community-level work; it is a labour-intensive exercise and as such it is difficult to employ it to target many communities at the same time (see Part two).

PVCA should be applied at an appropriate scale. For example, in trying to use PVCA at national level, we risk treating the exercise as a sort of national-scale assessment of partners' capacity, focusing too much on organisational capacity and as a capacity-building exercise. In addition, we should not underestimate the time and effort that a national-scale exercise needs.

In Bangladesh, our BDRC project started with a national PVCA, the preparation of which took several months and a great deal of time and attention. The Christian Aid country office has to agree with implementing partners the criteria for selecting villages and communities, the methodology and the kind of support services that it will provide to partners during the exercise. Workshops and seminars have to be organised and facilitated; different methodologies compared and adapted to the local reality; guidelines written down and training materials prepared.

There are several ways of achieving results that have a wider impact than the community targeted with a PVCA:

- documenting the project as an evidence-based example to address issues at a regional level
- reinforcing regional networks to exchange experience
- showing other communities the results to encourage replication.

Another option for scaling up PVCA is to work closely with relevant government departments. Capacity building and lobbying of government staff at local and district levels should focus on promoting PVCAs as a first step for community-development planning. For example, in the Philippines, district governments were trained to use the findings from community PVCAs to establish trends across districts and identify development priorities by area to contribute to their planning.

Our experience shows that to scale up PVCA for a greater impact beyond the immediate community, work should be complemented by:

- partner-capacity assessments
- mapping of existing initiatives and networks
- area/country baseline studies regarding disaster risk and climate trends.

BDRC projects were based on initial country 'baseline studies' conducted by an external consultant who mapped opportunities, vulnerabilities and partners' experiences to help to make decisions, for example, in terms of targeting and capacity building.

Reinforcing pre-conceived assumptions: connecting local concerns with disaster risks

When conducting a PVCA we need to be flexible and open minded. When the community action plan is defined by the community's perception of its vulnerability there is a

likelihood that it may differ from what we expected. This also challenges the use of a PVCA as an opportunity to seek funding, as donors' priorities do not always fit with the actual vulnerability and needs and actions as identified in the action plan. Community problems are very often linked to everyday life risks such as undrinkable water and illness rather than large-scale disasters. When conducting a PVCA the facilitators need to give due attention to people's own assessments of risks but at the same time fulfil the project objective of reducing community vulnerability to future shocks and crises (in the case of BDRC projects).

Ways to respond to the challenge of connecting local concerns with actual disaster risks are to diagnose community needs with respect to all areas of risk and vulnerability; integrate existing programmes; identify partnerships with other organisations to fill the gaps, and advocate for other stakeholders and government to address some of the issues identified by the communities.⁷

In the community of Los Cadix in El Salvador, one of the identified risks was the threat of organised youth gangs (Maras). Through the PVCA action plan, the community organised activities to raise awareness among the youths and to provide alternatives to the gang activities. The only assistance they required from outside the community was the support of neighbouring communities.

Many communities in the countries in which we work have high expectations of what they can receive from development organisations. The PVCA exercise requires a change of approach as it focuses on a community's own capacities. If the exercise is facilitated appropriately and communities understand the objectives, they should come up with an action plan requiring very little need of external assistance. Many of the activities will involve improving community organisation and mobilising community members to work towards common goals. An important achievement of PVCA is that communities understand the benefit of the exercise for themselves.

PVCA as a research method

PVCA should be treated as the prelude to programme activities, not just an extractive research exercise. This implies that we should plan for follow-up activities in each of the communities that conduct a PVCA. It is very important to consider the expectations that many arise from communities after conducting such an intensive participatory exercise.

The use of PVCA in conflict and post-conflict situations:

In BDRC-project countries, in which Christian Aid has had most experience of conducting PVCAs, risks have been related to natural disasters rather than to conflict. However, some elements of conflict at community level and exclusion were also discussed and addressed through PVCA exercises (for example, the problems of minority groups, inter-generational conflict, and management of common resources).

Conducting a PVCA using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques in Bangladesh revealed that community conflicts exist and that even in a time of hazards, the majority always tries to limit the access of minorities to the services available. This problem has to be carefully negotiated to make operations a success.⁸ To identify such conflict at an early stage can help project implementation and promote understanding of the change we want to make.

Christian Aid conducted PVCA on-the-job training for partners in Sierra Leone in February 2006 and the exercise included the identification of early warning indicators for conflict at community level. The PVCA revealed that inter-generational conflict in addition to youth unemployment was one of the factors that had previously triggered conflict in the country .

However, the use of PVCA as a tool for conflict resolution has not been sufficiently explored and there are issues that need careful assessment before starting on a PVCA process in settings where there is violent conflict and severe social exclusion. These include the nature of the conflict or exclusion and the risk of PVCA increasing rather than reducing social divisions, the risks to the facilitators in travelling and operating in conflict areas and the likelihood of dominant interests manipulating a PVCA process to increase their power or access to resources in a way that can increase poverty and marginalisation rather than reduce it.

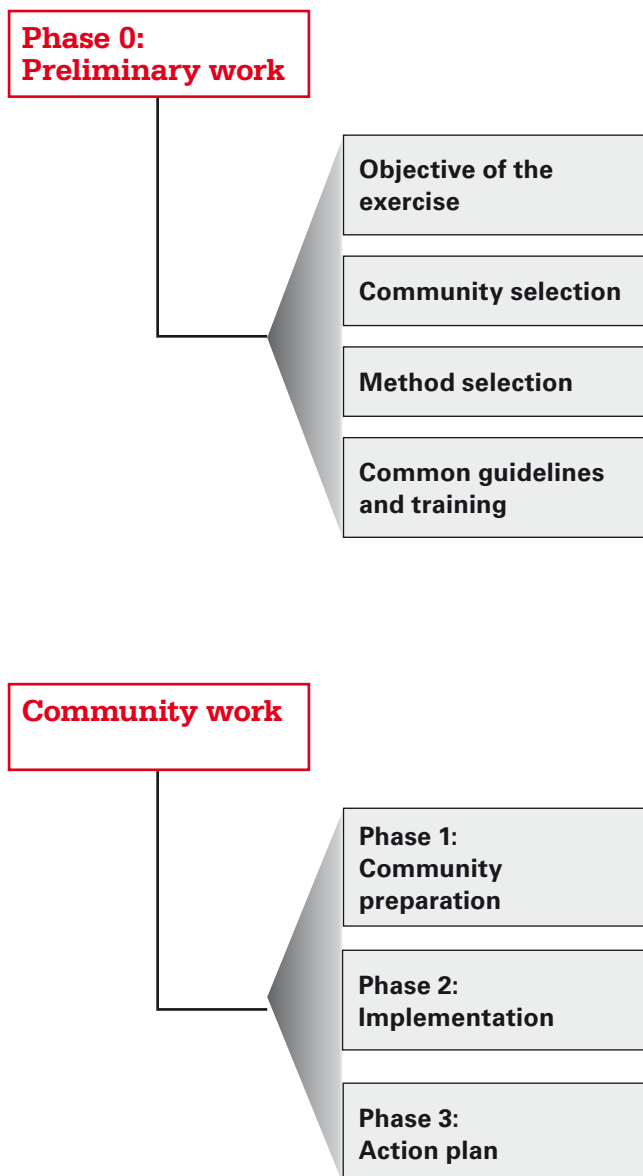
In a conflict situation the use of a PVCA may be impossible as community links may be disrupted and broken as refugees and displaced persons are forced to leave their communities.

PART TWO

HOW TO CONDUCT A PVCA

CONDUCTING A PVCA STEP BY STEP

Figure 1. Conducting a PVCA



PRELIMINARY WORK

Before conducting a PVCA with communities, it is very important to conduct preliminary work with partners' staff and field facilitators, using the following framework:

i) Define the objective of the exercise.

Clarifying the objective of the exercise is very important to ensure we are focused and also to be clear as to what expectations we can allow ourselves to create in communities.

ii) Community selection.

It is important to establish common criteria to target the selection of communities early in the exercise.

The selection of the right number of communities should balance two main sets of variables: the resources available to a Christian Aid country office and the implementing partners – including human, financial and technical expertise – and the objective of the project plus the level of detail expected from the exercise. The communities selected should offer the best way to produce the expected outputs at a reasonable expense of resources. For example, if the project has a learning objective (as with BDRC projects) the capacity to achieve proper 'monitoring for learning' should most influence the final number of communities.

iii) Method selection.

Another important decision at this stage is to choose the methods (from existing PRA techniques) and timing for the exercise (from one day to two or more weeks per village). The expected use of the results, the level of capacity and technical skills available to local partners and the socio-political context – especially the potential for conflict – are relevant criteria by which to prepare the activities and tools to be used.

Tools selected by the BDRC Bangladesh project to conduct a PRA at village level were:

- focus group discussion
- transect walks (a walk around the village to observe the area)
- timelines
- social mapping
- risk mapping
- ranking (including wealth/vulnerability)
- power-structure analysis
- seasonal diagrams and calendars
- action-plan development.

The number and complexity of tools that will be used during a local PVCA exercise are directly dependent on what we expect from the exercise. The time and resources

demanding by complex quantitative analysis may not be easily available in the local partners' organisations and certainly not among average community members.

Ideally, a PVCA will draw on all readily available and reliable sources of information, and can use quantitative information to triangulate or cross-reference with qualitative information.

iv) Common guidelines and training.

One central task for the capacity-building partner is to develop PVCA guidelines and training materials well adapted to the needs and requirements of the implementing partners. These guidelines should include:

- the common criteria to select target communities
- the methodology and tools needed to conduct the exercise
- the outputs expected from partners, including financial and narrative reporting procedures.

They should also inform on the capacity-building support services available for partners and any national project or programme with which this activity integrates.

The guidelines should be understood by partners well before the start of village-level activities. Good practice is to organise a three- to five-day training event for project officers where they can familiarise themselves with the tools selected and practise with them in a controlled environment – for example, with a community which has a long history of cooperation with some of the partners and who are well informed about the nature of the exercise. This training event is also an opportunity to clarify the reporting requirements and the time schedule. It is also recommended that the training includes field testing as this has been found to be a great opportunity to anticipate challenges that may occur during the actual community exercises.

Partners should adapt materials to be used by the field staff and community volunteers who will be directly involved in the community-exercise guidelines. It is important that the implementing partners receive appropriate training before the field exercise, but it is even more critical that they are able to pass this knowledge to those who will be directly conducting the exercise.

In Malawi, for example, at first partners found understanding DRR concepts complicated. Therefore staff looked first at understanding people's lives before doing an analysis of hazards. Staff decided to take three steps in the analysis. These were:

- livelihood assessment
- hazard assessment
- vulnerability assessment (interaction between hazards and livelihoods).

COMMUNITY WORK

Several methods of conducting a PVCA are available in the technical literature, ranging from rapid, people-friendly and mostly qualitative methods involving participatory appraisal (such as PRA) to the more formal, scientific-oriented surveys based mainly on quantitative statistics.

Described below is a suggested methodology for carrying out PVCA with a community based on Christian Aid staff and partners' experience. The exercise is divided into three phases (of different duration dependent on the context).

Phase 1. Community preparation

i) Explanation and clarification of guidelines and concepts between selected facilitators for the specific community.

In this phase, it is very important for the facilitators to agree the terminology to be used and how to explain, in a practical way and with appropriate language, the concepts to the communities. Furthermore, the partner staff must be ready to explain to community members about the follow-up – what do they plan to do with the information and, more importantly, how the community will benefit from the exercise (see Part 1, point 2 on possible uses of PVCA).

ii) Meeting with the community leaders/representatives to explain the programme and arrangements.

The objectives should be discussed and agreed with the community representatives. At this point the nature of the exercise and what representatives can expect must be made clear from the beginning. The possible results of the exercise should be explained and discussed.

During this phase accountability will be discussed and planned with the community representatives. There should be discussion of the best way to share information in the community and how to handle complaints and feedback.

At this point it is important to decide who should be invited from the community to participate (taking into consideration factors such as gender composition, age, number of village

members and which villages to involve) and how the groups will be divided. Women, men, young people and elderly people are common divisions, but division by village/village section may be more appropriate if several villages are participating.

It is important to organise any other logistical arrangements needed for the community exercise (transport, food, refreshments) and decide/inform on budget provision.

The decision on the duration and times for the activity will depend on the context and community members' availability. Christian Aid's experience has been that a whole day of community work can be too exhausting and different community groups need to attend other activities at specific times of the day. If the exercise is conducted over several days, it is important to plan outputs for each day as there is a risk of breaking the dynamic and the flow of discussion.

In Malawi the exercise was conducted in several steps, looking first at understanding people's lives before doing an analysis on hazards (livelihoods assessment), and later focusing on a hazard assessment and vulnerability assessment (as interaction between hazards and livelihoods).

Phase 2. Implementation – participatory exercise with the community

A participatory exercise should be undertaken with community representatives about vulnerability and capacities in their community.

After a presentation and explanation of the programme and objectives, the day could start with an ice-breaker exercise on the importance of participation (such as What is in the box? an example used in Malawi).

After the ice-breaker, the community members should split into groups for the next phase.

The sustainable livelihoods framework is the best model to structure the discussion on vulnerabilities and capacities but it is also a complex framework to use with communities. The sustainable livelihoods framework (see Figure 2) leads us to ask:⁹

- What are people currently doing to make a living (livelihoods, options and capacities)?
- What policies, institutions and values support or constrain people's ability to earn a living and to live with dignity and social justice (structures and processes)?
- What shocks, cycles or trends support or constrain people's livelihoods and human dignity (vulnerability context)?

What is in the box?

In this exercise, we place some items in a box (such as a pencil, a stone, a piece of paper and a leaf) and invite three people from the community to play.

One of them is allowed to shake the box, listen to the sound and guess what is in the box.

The second person is blindfolded and can touch the contents and guess what is in the box.

The third person is allowed to open and look in the box.

The community members have to guess who is playing the role of Christian Aid, who is representing the partner organisation and who is playing the role of a community member.

The conclusion should be that all three want to know what problems the community faces, but only the community knows what the real problems are. By reaching that conclusion themselves, community members can understand the importance of participation.

- What are people's strengths and opportunities, and what can they do to improve their livelihood outcomes (livelihood strategies)?
- To what extent are people achieving sustainable livelihoods?

A good way to overcome this complexity and focus the group discussions is to start with a community-mapping exercise. The group draws a map identifying the different elements and then the discussion should go in the following sequence:

1. Vulnerability context (what their main problems are and why).

We seek to understand:

- the main problems/issues/hazards that the community faces
- how these affect the community (as a whole and specific groups)
- why they affect the community in this way.

In this section, we will face the challenge of connecting local concerns with actual disaster risks. Facilitators need to be flexible, so people are able to express their perceptions of their vulnerabilities and link these with hazards and natural disasters.

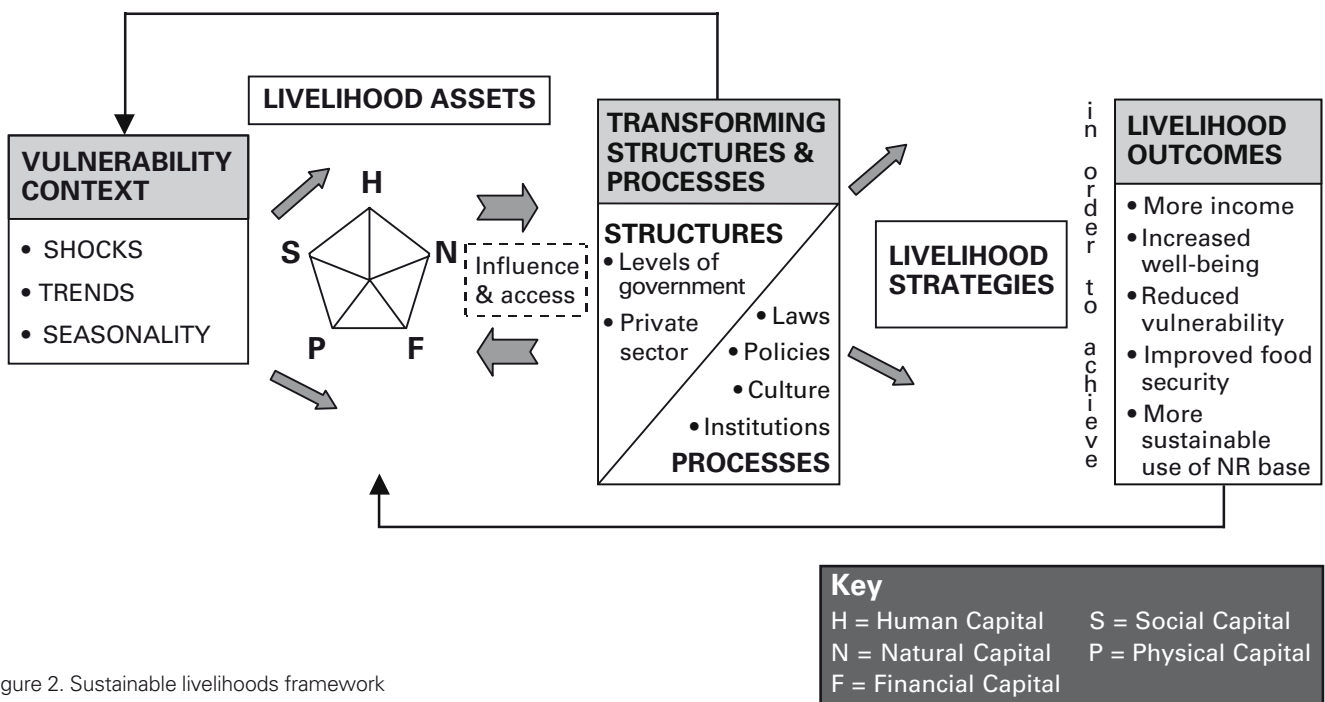


Figure 2. Sustainable livelihoods framework

2. Capacities (what they have to help them cope with these problems).

PVCA should be focused on the capacities people have to help them face the main problems identified above, so this discussion helps them to understand how they can take transformative actions based on these capacities.

It is very important to guide the discussion so all the capacities of the different community groups are considered. Often the more marginalised groups are considered mainly as recipients of assistance and so their capacities are underestimated, and not fully explored and assessed.

The discussion on capacities should include the full range of assets:

- natural (water, land, rivers, forests, minerals)
- physical (infrastructure, shelter, tools, transport, water and sanitation, energy)
- financial (income, savings, remittances, pensions, credit, state transfers)
- social (relationships, networks, religious faith, affiliations, reciprocity, trust, mutual exchange)

- human (knowledge, education, skills, health, physical ability).

3. Structures and processes (is there any other structure or group inside or outside the community that affects their life?)

The focus should be on existing structures and processes in the community that affect their livelihoods – whether they are supporting or disrupting their livelihoods. Drawing structures and processes on the map helps people to understand how these structures influence their lives. Most of these structures will have been previously discussed as capacities.

In Burkina Faso, villagers wrote village disaster committees on the map – these committees, they said, were an important asset to the community as they were in charge of warning villagers in case of disaster.

4. Outcomes (what would villagers’ ideal situation be? What form would improved well-being take in their village?).

A good way to discuss outcomes is to ask what villagers’ ideal future would be or what vision they have for their village. In response to these questions, villagers sometimes refer to better times in the past.

Main challenges encountered in the first field test of PVCA exercises – partner training in Burkina Faso in October 2008

- **Timeframe and duration:** facilitators need to be flexible when planning for the exercise so they are able to adapt to time constraints in the communities. In most cases during the Burkina Faso test the implementation phase could not be completed in one day. In some cases, partners opted for working with a community group each day and then making a general presentation at the end, followed by action planning.
- **Communities are more used to short extractive exercises, so it is important they understand what the exercise will involve and how long it will last.**
- **The challenge of ensuring participation:** the exercise was conducted in conjunction with other participatory techniques, depending on facilitator skills and experience.
- **Terminology and translations:** there was a great challenge in explaining terminology to communities, for example the concept of threat/vulnerability context. Community members tended to talk about all their problems, including those not linked to disasters (such as problems with basic services).
- **Presenting back to the community:** there was difficulty in finding speakers among community members who could take notes and make a presentation to the group. Partner staff spoke in French and tended to use technical expressions rather than reflecting what local people were saying. There is also a need to have a consensus before writing down an idea.
- **Size of the groups:** Some groups were too large to conduct a discussion, mainly in the action plan phase.
- **Most of these difficulties can be overcome by dedicating enough time and effort in the preparation phase with the facilitators and community representatives. It is important to:**
 - agree on timing for sessions that fit around community obligations
 - select facilitators who are skilled and acquainted with PRA techniques
 - agree terminology
 - collect/acquire material that will be used during implementation
 - agree how the group exercise will be presented to the plenary session and by whom
 - agree on the size of the groups – the number of people necessary for groups to work effectively.

In a northern Burkina Faso village, elders referred to a period in the past (50 years ago) when their now Sahelian village was full of trees and pasture. There was a discussion about why this had changed so quickly and what could be done to get back to a situation when their land was more fertile.

5. Livelihood strategies (what are you currently doing to achieve that 'ideal situation'? What else could be done?).

List and discuss the pros and cons of current and alternative coping mechanisms – options to achieve the outcomes they wish to achieve.

Facilitators should monitor the timing and ensure that everybody participates in the group. This discussion will feed ideas for the next phase: the action plan.

At the end of the exercise there will be group presentations.

During the group exercise, community members should be encouraged to use any materials available, including drawings and symbols, – with a view to presenting their work to the other groups (for example, one person could copy the drawings on to a flipchart).

Phase 3. Action plan

The main outcome of a PVCA is the community action plan. The plan details decisions made by the community on the best course of action to address their problems.

Once the information has been collected and analysed, partners, facilitators and community representatives are ready to decide the best course of action. A table is drawn up listing the risks and vulnerabilities identified by the community. This table is used to discuss with the community what can be done to address or reduce each risk by listing potential risk-reduction activities against each of the problems.

It is important at this stage to decide who from the community will participate in this exercise, so that it is inclusive and is based on the understanding that not everybody in the community may agree to the suggested actions and priorities. The facilitators have an important role here in making sure that members of the community work together and that they do not divide up into different groups and interests.

One practice used across many BDRC project countries was to prioritise the problems and develop activity lists (Table 1

in Appendix) with the group that was involved in phase 2 but then ask the community to select a smaller 'task force' to decide the details on how to implement each activity (Table 2 in Appendix).

These activities can then be discussed and prioritised and divided into:

- those activities which can be implemented by the community without outside assistance
- what needs external assistance (from government, other local sources or NGOs).

It is important to note that many issues can be addressed in both the short and long term by the community without further assistance (see Tables 2 and 3 in Appendix).

The community action plan can be recorded in a variety of different documents. For example, it can be stored as a social document, a shared narrative account of the expectations of the community, the steps they are going to take to achieve them and the roles and responsibilities of each of the local stakeholders who have committed to the plan.

The adoption of the plan can be socially reinforced by symbolic acts, such as planting a tree or painting a wall mural. A common feature is the performing of traditional ceremonies – including masses – to signify the important and binding nature of the decisions taken. It is very important to ensure that the procedure of adopting the action plan is as close as possible to the traditional decision-making processes of the community. Otherwise, the plan could be considered external, belonging to an NGO and not morally binding for community members.

Another way of building commitment to the action plan is to have it endorsed by local authorities and incorporated into official, administrative documents such as rural development or civil-protection plans. This solution uses the current political structures of modern nation states to ensure the local ownership of the plan. It can also have the advantage of making the document legally binding for the local authorities and certain stakeholders.

Finally, the community action plan should always be recorded as a project document. It should be included in the local PVCA report and, when appropriate, developed into a separate written document by project officers and endorsed by the appropriate level of management. This action alone may not be enough to build the commitment of the community or to bring local authorities to account, but it is a clear signal of the commitment of the Christian Aid partner to the plan and its willingness to contribute to the community efforts to reduce the risk of disaster to livelihoods.

It is important to note that, as the community action plan is the main outcome of the PVCA, the most important service we can provide to disaster-prone communities is therefore to support them in the development of pragmatic, realistic and effective actions to reduce their vulnerability to disasters.

Climate change analysis in PVCA

Climate change may increase the vulnerabilities identified by a community as well as bring new threats and therefore a climate analysis must inform the PVCA. When selecting the most appropriate actions we need to make sure we are taking predictions of possible future scenarios into consideration and we are not increasing vulnerability to climate change.

Including climate analysis in PVCA requires bringing to communities adequate discussion about methodological data as well as a mechanism so PVCA results can be updated with the latest prediction information.¹⁰

At the end of the exercise it is very important to discuss again the objectives of the exercise and clarify any misunderstandings or false expectations. As in any participatory exercise, it is good practice to ask the participants what they think about the exercise and what they have learned.

Explain to the community what the next steps are, for example what you intend to do with the information and how you may be able to assist the community in implementing some of the risk-reduction activities identified.

Those activities that the community has identified as requiring external assistance may particularly need our support. Christian Aid can help communities to identify their potential to address their own issues so they can access entitlements and rights.

In addition, it is necessary to clarify the means of sharing information and addressing complaints after the exercise has finished.

CONCLUSION

PVCA is an essential tool in assessing community vulnerability and capacities. It can be used not only for designing DRR projects but also for poverty reduction. PVCA can empower communities to challenge the things that keep them in poverty, increase local ownership of actions and greatly increase the impact of projects and activities.

While some participatory exercises require preparation, time and skills, the added value of PVCA is that the analysis of the information can be carried out by communities themselves. If done well it has a huge potential to support Christian Aid in achieving its goal of changing the lives of some of the poorest people in the world.

ENDNOTES

1 Charles Abugre, Paul Valentin, No Small Change: Christian Aid's Understanding of How Change Happens, Christian Aid, December 2007, www.christianaid.org.uk/images/no-small-change-2010.pdf

2 Christian Aid, Adaptation Toolkit: Integrating Adaptation to Climate Change into Secure Livelihoods, Figure 6, shows how PVCA fits into the four stages of adaptation.

3 Christian Aid, Turning Hope into Action: a Vision of a World Free from Poverty, Strategic Framework 2010-12, December 2009, www.christianaid.org.uk/aboutus/who/key_publications/strategic-framework.aspx

4 Christian Aid, Accountable Governance: Corporate Strategy 2007-2010, 8 December 2008.

5 HAP (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership), www.hapinternational.org/

6 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), What is VCA? An Introduction to Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment, 2006, www.proventionconsortium.org/themes/default/pdfs/CRA/What-is-VCA.pdf

7 Ibid

8 Kajal Chatterjee, Towards Building a Disaster Resilient Community: An Endeavour of Christian Aid, Bangladesh, Christian Aid, 2007.

9 Department for International Development (DfID), Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets, April 1999, www.nssd.net/pdf/sectiont.pdf

10 Christian Aid, Adaptation Toolkit: Integrating Adaptation to Climate Change into Secure Livelihoods.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Disaster risk reduction activity table – example of list of activities

Problem/risk	What can be done?	Without external assistance	With some external assistance
	Immediately		
	Medium term		
	Long term		

Table 2. Example of an action plan

Problem/vulnerability to reduce	Activities/tasks to carry out	Persons responsible for the task	Calendar	Resources required (internal/external)

Table 3. Example of an action plan used in Bramhangaon in Bangladesh by villagers and the Christian Aid partner Friends in Village Development in Bangladesh

Problems identified through priority ranking	Means of problem resolution	Availability of resources/facilities	Types of resources/facilities required	When required	Support needed from
River erosion	Riverbank protection work using sand-filled gunny bags Removal of water blockage including all necessary work	Volunteer labour	Sand bags Bamboo	In the month of Falgun Chaitra	Villagers Friends in Village Development in Bangladesh (FIVDB) Local government Water Development Board
Water logging	Drain re-excavation	Volunteer labour Existing narrow drain	Labour for digging	In the month of Magh Falgun Chaitra	Villagers FIVDB
Water sanitation	Raise the base of existing tube wells and establish new ones Establish ring slab latrine	Volunteer labour Masonry Existing tube well	Pipe Cement bricks Sand Ring slab	In the month of Agrahayan Chaitra	Villagers FIVDB UP
Lack of awareness	Building the capacity of the community on issue of disaster management. Providing first aid box. Organising training on healthcare and mothers' care during hazard and disaster	Participants	Training materials and trainers	Throughout the year	Villagers FIVDB
Unemployment	Providing training on alternative livelihoods	Willingness of the community	Training materials and trainers	Throughout the year	Villagers FIVDB

POVERTY

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